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Derek Ingram: Commonwealth journalist and commentator

Ashley Crowson and Ruth Craggs

Derek Ingram was a journalist and commentator whose life was lived, in large part, through the ideas, institutions and countries of the Commonwealth. A highly successful journalist on Fleet Street after the Second World War, Ingram credited travels in Cyprus and Northern Rhodesia (later Zambia) – both on the verge of independence – in the 1950s for the start of his interest in, and commitment to, decolonisation.ⁱ The latter trip brought Ingram into contact with both Zambian independence leaders and colonial administrators and marked the beginning of his passionate engagement with anti-racist and anti-apartheid movements. On his return, Ingram wrote several open letters to British and African politicians urging respectful dialogue and partnership.ⁱⁱ He was insistent that the British Colonial Office should make allies of ‘skilled’ and ‘capable’ leaders such as Kenneth Kaunda – of whom Ingram remained a firm supporter – and work together towards African majority rule.

He followed this dialogue on Rhodesia with several idealistic books dealing with issues of race and the Commonwealth.ⁱⁱⁱ These titles extolled the virtues of the Commonwealth as a multi-racial organisation with voluntary membership based around principles of equality. The Commonwealth that Ingram described in these early books was one in which independence, industrialisation, and modernisation in the formerly colonised world would lead to a bright future for all. Whilst this initial optimism was later tempered, and a more critical account of Britain’s decolonisation and post-colonial failures offered in later writing, Ingram remained unshakeably committed to the Commonwealth as a force for good.^{iv}

In the mid-1960s, Ingram’s position as *Daily Mail* deputy editor became increasingly untenable as his outspoken commitment to African independence movements drew the ire of the *Mail*’s conservative proprietor. Ingram faced the prospect of being moved from the newsroom into a managerial position. As he put it in a letter at the time:

I am first and foremost a journalist and this I wish to remain... Either I accept a safe job, very comfortable life and remain with [Associated] Newspapers perhaps for the rest of my working life or I... take a gamble... I am still as sold as ever on the Commonwealth agency idea... If I don’t have a go at it I shall always reproach myself for not doing it.^v

The ‘Commonwealth agency idea’ became the Gemini News Service, a news features agency which Ingram ran for more than 25 years.^{vi} Gemini focussed

on issues that were directly related to the global south, and particularly the Commonwealth. It operated between 1967 and 2002, distributing features twice-weekly to more than 100 subscribing newspapers, mostly across the global south, where the agency earned itself many fans. Gemini distinguished itself from its competition with its policy of, wherever possible, having global south journalists write about the places they were from. Frequent Gemini contributor Gamini Navaratne believed this to be the agency's greatest strength: 'it draws from the journalistic resources of the Third World... unlike [the] fly-by-nights who descend suddenly from the first and second worlds, spend a few days in a country and write as experts on complex problems.'^{vii} Gemini responded to Ingram's concerns that international journalism remained colonised in the topics and regions that it covered – providing material that was not meeting the informational needs of newly-independent societies.

While at the helm of Gemini, Ingram travelled extensively within the Commonwealth and met frequently with many of its leaders. He was a fixture in the press-rooms of Commonwealth conferences, with many journalist colleagues turning to him as a font of knowledge about the organisation.^{viii} Ingram used his prominence in the journalistic field and the attention afforded by Commonwealth summits to publicly advocate for the principles of the Commonwealth and for progress within it. At the 1979 meeting, which was dominated by the issue of Rhodesia, Ingram wrote a widely-reproduced open letter to Margaret Thatcher strongly condemning her obstructionism and urging her to embrace the summit as a forum in which meaningful headway could be made.^{ix} Gemini ran a special service during Commonwealth conferences, providing subscribing newspapers with Ingram's daily dispatches.

Alongside his writing, Ingram made several other key contributions to the association. He was central to many Commonwealth civil society organisations, making important interventions across many decades. For example, he was constantly chivvying organisations like the Royal Commonwealth Society (RCS) to modernise. As early as 1973, he was pushing for the removal of Cecil Rhodes from the Society's headquarters, arguing 'Rhodes is a highly controversial figure in Commonwealth terms and one that is anathema to many who believe in today's Commonwealth and not in yesterday's Empire.'^x

Ingram established the Commonwealth Journalists Association (CJA) in 1978 alongside the *Guardian's* Patrick Keatley, which played a key role in training young journalists across the association and fostering Commonwealth-wide professional networks. He was co-founder of the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative in 1987. Ingram was a member of this journal's editorial

board (the 'Moot') from 1971 and contributed regular 'Commonwealth updates' from 1983. As the journal took a more academic turn, he consistently argued for policy relevance, coverage of current affairs and timely commentary in its pages. Here, as with Gemini, the CJA and the RCS, his interest was firmly in the present and future, rather than the past.

Ingram also worked closely with the Commonwealth Secretariat from its inception in 1965, supporting its work, collaborating closely with its information team, acting as an election observer, and building firm friendships, including with several secretaries General. Despite these connections, Ingram remained vocal about the Commonwealth's failures as well as its successes. Engaging critically, but seriously, with the Commonwealth as a political project, should be seen as one of his greatest contributions.

Ingram gave shape to the Commonwealth not only through his writings but through his practices. He made connections everywhere; in regions such as southern and eastern Africa, where Gemini had considerable influence, Ingram is still fondly remembered. Veteran Zambian journalist Jones Kaumba noted in 2011 for example:

[Y]ou can't talk about journalism without talking about Ingram... Not only me, virtually all Zambian journalists have a lot of respect for that gentleman... [O]nce in a while you come across journalists like that who take their responsibility a bit further, and I think that's what Ingram has done.^{xi}

His home in London illustrated his global networks, his commitments, and his interests. Alongside bookshelves groaning with volumes about the Commonwealth and his personal archives, his house was adorned with ephemera representing more than 70 years of engagement: photographs between gun-toting border guards, letters from (in)famous politicians, and photographs of friends, family and colleagues. Ingram was legendary for his hospitality and sociability, and this itself should be seen as evidence of a broader political and ethical commitment to welcoming those from around the Commonwealth to London.

Whilst Gemini, and his belief in the possibilities of the Commonwealth may be seen as idealistic, many of Ingram's commitments and ideas today seem increasingly important. Gemini sought to decolonise the news decades before 'decolonising knowledge' came to dominate academic and popular debates. His commitment to internationalism, anti-racism, and journalism for the public good seem even more important in 2018.

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- ⁱ Ingram, D. (1960) *Partners in Adventure*. London: Pan Books.
- ⁱⁱ Ingram, D. (1959) Postscript to a talk at sundown. *The Daily Mail*, 3 April. p.6; Ingram, D. (1960) It's time Welensky stopped this white mischief. *The Daily Mail*, 26 October. p.12.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Ingram, D. (1960) *Partners in Adventure*. London: Pan Books; Ingram, D. (1962) *The commonwealth Challenge*. London: Allen & Unwin; Ingram, D. (1965) *Commonwealth for a Colour-Blind World*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- ^{iv} See Ingram, D. (1977) *The Imperfect Commonwealth*. London: Rex Collings.
- ^v Ingram, D. (1965) [Letter to Richard Hall]. 27 April. Richard Hall personal collection, emphasis in original.
- ^{vi} Bourne, R. (1995) *News on a Knife-edge: Gemini journalism and a global agenda*. London: John Libbey.
- ^{vii} Navaratne, G. (1992) What they say about Gemini [Gemini promotional literature]. Records of the Gemini News Service. File GEM 6/3/3/1.
- ^{viii} See Sanger, C. (1979) Journal of an Extraordinary Heads of Government Meeting: Lusaka, Zambia, August 1979, <https://commonwealthoralhistories.org/2015/clyde-sanger-journal/>, Accessed 9 July 2018.
- ^{ix} Ingram, D. (1979) It is not too late to act, 'Iron Lady'. *Times of Zambia*. 3 August. p.8.
- ^x Ingram D. and Smith, P. (1973) Memorandum by Derek Ingram and Peter Smith for consideration by the Royal Commonwealth Society's Central council on Thursday, 21st June, 1973. p2. Archives of the Royal Commonwealth Society. Central Council - Agendas, minutes and papers 1971-1973.
- ^{xi} Extract of an interview with Jones Kaumba conducted by Ruth Craggs in the offices of Zamcom in Lusaka on 27 July 2011.